

Merida Poems

And Other Poetry of Place



By Doug Tanoury

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

For Merida—
My second home, but my first love.

FUNKY DOG PUBLISHING



DETROIT, MICHIGAN USA



Printed on recycled paper

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

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The profits from the first edition of this book were donated to Habla: The Center for Language and Culture and used to fund a special scholarship program for the education of language teachers.

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Arches

In Merida there are arches everywhere,
Grand openings to fine vistas and
Simple entryways of more mundane places,
Some monolithic apertures in stone walls,
Others flying entrances, lifted aloft by columns:
Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Mexicano.

An arch is the softest of openings and
The most perfect portal for moving
Through the hard divisions in life,
Between spaces separated by function,
Opening one into another without the
Broken and jagged edges of lines.

A city gate that rises high above the street
Frames lanes of taxis and city buses with its
Classical Roman form as if to confer
Some type of imperial order on the crazy
And crowded tangle of traffic that passes
Through its arch like a cavalcade of Vandals.

In Merida all entrances and exits are done
With classical flourish, and all mistakes
Are mitigated by an architectural order,
As everything that passes through an arch
Appears more refined and even the most
Incongruous spirit emerges more perfect.

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Sunday Morning Canvas

I walk on Sunday morning along el Paseo de Montejo,
Looking at the paintings that artists have spread
Along the wide sidewalk, some rest on fabric and blankets,
Others are matted only by grey stained concrete:
 A still life with mangoes and oranges
 That is a stiff and formal study in color,
 Form, light and shadow;
 A landscape of a ruined henequen hacienda,
 Where only a brick smokestack is standing unscathed
 In bright afternoon sunlight like an obelisk;
 A portrait of two Mayan women wearing white huipiles
 Sitting silhouetted in sunset shadows of a doorway.

I walk along el Paseo de Montejo and sit on a wooden bench
Under a flamboyant tree, trying to see people from my life,
Past and present, as if they were paintings:
 I see her face as a portrait washed in blue light
 So weak that it barely emerges
 From a Mars black background;
 His face, as a pencil sketch
 Of an old man that Leonardo might draw,
 And she is a nude that Renoir would paint,
 Shaped like ripe fruit, naked and smiling,
 Surrounded by bright color and a light that shines
 From the high upper left corner of my memory.

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Mayan Angels

A real estate angel taken with the colonial quaintness
Of Centro Historico brought me to my house on Calle 68,
A place where it is mostly silent on sunlit afternoons
And I am often sleeping in the shade of an old aguacate tree.
I rouse slowly to semi-consciousness
When the church bells of San Sebastian ring
But I soon slip back to my dreams, forgetting appointments,
Commitments, tasks, requests and other forms of obligation.

There is a courtyard angel who watches over me,
Guards my slumber and maintains the peace of this place,
Mitigates the earthy gravity of all my sins
And in restful levitation suspends me perfectly
In my hammock, floating in lighter than air fashion
Somewhere between earth and sky, and gives me
Holy absolution for all my broken promises made to
So-and-so to do this-or-that at such-and-such.

In the long afternoons of late April, when it is so hot
That even the air, reluctant to move, slows to a stop,
And all things are stationary and still, I lay in my hammock
Under the tejaban, between walls painted amarillo and verde
As if I were sleeping soundly deep inside an avocado,
And in my dreams I see the faces of Mayan angels,
Their golden skin the color of morning light,
Their laughter, birds singing in a mango tree.

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Rooftop Garden

High above Merida, on the rooftop garden of Casa Mexillio,
We drink cervezas on winter evenings and look up at the sky,
Sometimes the moon is full and encircled with a silver nimbus
And hangs magically over us like a painted theatre backdrop,
A stylized representation of an evening sky that when unfurled
Somehow changes both players and stage, as we too are
Transformed beneath a canvas canopy of painted night.

We lean with our elbows on the wrought iron railing, looking
Over the city, talking in low voices, the wind in our hair,
Escaping for a time from the heat that turns the air into a
Thick oily soup, and sheltered from the noise of streets below:
autobuses and taxis speeding down Calle 68, brakes singing
The high and powerful soprano of castrati and transmissions
That clunk their way through the quiet of tropical nights.

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A Study in Form

I have mastered the art of approach
The dance of improvisational movement
Around a subject
Like the low brick facades on Main Street
Articulated by second storey windows

The movement of muscle
Sinew and bone
An expression of torso and limbs
My body bent into a word
Moving in a phrase
My breath upon a line of verse
Of what is and why
Toward what could be and is

This is the art of pose and stance
Rhythm and tempo
For I have mastered the approach
And am a channel for burning forces
That bubble up in blood vessels and brain
In nerve endings and spine
Twisted in all the expressions of form
All the permutations of shape

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The Passionate Practice of Proper Punctuation

My life is a passionate	
Practice of proper punctuation as	
The courtyard is a parenthetic expression	<i>(colon)</i>
Where each day begins and I drink my coffee	<i>(opening parenthesis)</i>
In the morning while you sleep	<i>(oblique stroke)</i>
And in the evening when the moonlight	
Is on the piscina turning the water	
Into obsidian that reflects the palm trees	<i>(closing parenthesis)</i>
As we talk in low voices	<i>(lower case)</i>
Pop the tabs that open cerveza cans	
And talk about nothing serious or grave	<i>(semi-colon)</i>
Nothing pressing or urgent	
But only the ephemeral	
Superfluous and inane chatter	<i>(comma)</i>
That fills up the last conversations	
Of the day with domestic details	
On mundane topics of normal life	<i>(period)</i>
Until I fall asleep in the chair	<i>(ellipsis)</i>
My head droops and my breathing	
Becomes a long inhale followed by a series	
Of short stuttering exhales	<i>(dash)</i>
Know that somewhere deep	
In my somnolescent self	
There is a thought of you	<i>(asterisk)</i>
That is softness and tenderness	
And is as new as the first moment I saw you	<i>(footnote)</i>

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Abrazo Desesperado

There were lovers I would see
in the shadows of a doorway
of a crumbling façade articulated
with pilasters and a classical motif

below the roofline that reminded
me of a house I saw one afternoon
in Pompeii. I would see them after
midnight driving home down Calle 66

toward La Ermita, when the narrow
streets of Centro are deserted like
the dead city of Herculaneum, dark
and quiet, the only sound is the swoosh

of the wind in my windows and the echo
of my car passing along concrete walls
of casas that line the street like a cañón.
I would see them many nights, two bodies

intertwined in the doorway like the
plaster casts of people excavated from the
volcanic ash of Vesuvius. Now when I
drive home sometime after midnight,

I no longer see them there, but only the
flickering light of a television plays in
the shadows and from the window
a soft azul light shines through the

wooden slits of closed shutters,
and in the doorway of a crumbling façade
articulated by pilasters the only thing left,
the empty space of an abrazo desesperado.

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Sage with Umbrella Watches the Collapse of the Modern Age

I remember
It was a perfect summer day
The kind that only seems to occur
In early September, with a sky so azure
It seemed to glow with some
Inner luminescence and the vivid color finish
They spray on new cars in Detroit,
The ice blue sports cars and peacock blue sedans.
A day so temperate that
The air feels perfect against the skin.
It is more an absence of temperature,
As if both hot and cold have somehow slipped
Below the point of perception and the air
Itself has become imperceptible.

Ah, such a day
Of blue placid beauty.
And then the rains began.
In ways fitting for our age,
In abstract and surreal images,
In some post modernistic vision,
With glass and concrete towers
Intertwined with airplanes,
Add to that the obligatory apocalyptic
Flames and smoke and you have a work that
Dali would paint, a Warhol or a Max.
And the rain began.
It rained paper and desks,
Chairs and tables,
All the mundane debris
Of daily life.
And it rained people,
Arm flailing,
Legs kicking,
It rained fire,
It rained rock,
It rained dust.

And I find myself in a Peter Max
Oil on canvass, entitled:
"Sage with Umbrella Watches the Collapse of the Modern Age"

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Morning Study

Morning in Merida is a concerto
that I listen to when the house is still dark:
a rooster crowing in the distance,
a dog barking in a neighbor's yard,
a bird calling from the avocado tree.
In such quiet moments
I think that each day of my past
was merely a step on the journey
into a Mexican morning,
a preparation for this poet to witness the sunrise
backlit in glass panes of the puerta principal
with a weak gray light that outlines
the decorative wrought iron protectore
like a ribcage in an x-ray,
to testify to the day's first amber light
as it spills over a high courtyard wall,
to document in great detail the bells of San Sebastian
that ring each day at 6:30, 6:45 and 7:00,
to describe the wind as it moves
with gentle urgency in the garden,
causing ataxic movements
in the gingers and heliconias
and to record the sound of her footsteps
that echo softly under the tejaban
as she walks toward the kitchen.

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Alter Road

In summer children play in the front yards
With hair disheveled and dirty faces
Amid wooden frame homes
Ill kempt and needing repair
That line the street and sit wedged
Side by side and close to the road

Looking neither right nor left
In silence I pass them
The children continue to play as if I were invisible
Like a visitor from a nether world or some ghost
From the hereafter who has come down their street
Just to say hi how are you

But my mouth cannot bear the banality
Of such an average greeting to interrupt their play
For they are to me the poorly dressed reminders
Of a past troublesome and grim
Of days when childhood rested on me
Like an affliction both serious and dire

On this dark street like a Dickens novel
If I stop to talk to one child
I would be addressing my own pain
On a street crowded with regrets
Where problems pile up on the curb
Like the belongings of evicted tenants

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A Day in Concord

Was I at Walden Pond,
In autumn or spring?
I can't seem to recall now,
But I do remember
It was a season of transition,
Yes, this I know and will never forget.
For me the waters of the lake
Were magical and I sat down along the shore
On a large rock
Or was it a fallen tree trunk,
Whichever it was I sat on it
And took off my shoes, removed my socks and
Rolled up my pant legs, preparing to step in,
And I did, with slow and careful steps.
The water was cold and from the knees down
I was numb.

The water was clear, the bright sunlight
Made it look all the more pure,
As I waded out beyond my knees,
Up to my thighs, just below my waist,
I felt as if I had experienced some strange baptism,
That would wash away all my sins,
Like one who steps into the holy waters
Of the Ganges or Jordan.

There was a Baltimore oriole perched on a branch.
I recall the umber of its wings or belly,
Framed in the green foliage.
I remember too you calling my name
As you stood on the shore, and I was convinced
at that moment, in the quiet along that bank,
Like some holy revelation, and now I believe
That no one calls your name quite like your lover.

There is a quality to the sound,
Some intimate familiarity
Of mouth and tongue and lips,
That makes it sound differently
From every other person
That calls your name.
It is different,
As the song of an oriole
Is different from the chirp of a sparrow.

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Street Noise

Driving with her down the narrow
And crowded streets of Centro
Where each house is its own
Unique shape and handcrafted form,
Different from the one next to it
Like deformed, crooked and discolored teeth
Framed in a genuine but un-uniform smile
Are different one from another.

We have traveled this calle
And made this same turn many times.
I recall now as if a reoccurring dream,
This same dog
With its tits drooping low
Standing bewildered in the road
Looking at us as my horn barks
Staccato bursts.

Many times in the future
I will remember this moment too,
Our voices washed away by the
Swoosh of us driving with the windows down,
Speeding along streets that echo and amplify sound,
Transforming the mundane engine noise
Of the autobús
Into a trumpeting bull elephant.

Far from the present,
It will be at quiet times
When I remember, over and over,
Like a dream repeating,
The bright sunlight, hot air hitting us
In heated gusts
As when an oven door is opened.
I will hear her voice.
The sound a memory makes
As I recall.

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Remains of Your Smile

Nothing remains of you.
There is only empty space.
It is as if you were never here.
I look at the shape of you gone,
The color of you not being here,
The shadow of you filled now with light,
And I find that even memory blinks
Into you never being here:
Now you were not—
Now you were,
You lived here—
You never lived here.

It grows more difficult
To imagine the sound of your voice,
The touch of your hand
On my arm, the smell of your hair
As you lean close to my ear
And whisper some inane comment
About the color of something
Or other.

It seems like the only thing
That remains in my memory
Is your smile, and like the Cheshire Cat
In Alice in Wonderland,
You have vanished
Totally and completely
And the only thing that remains
Of you in my memory
Is your smile.

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Road to Todos Santos

Speeding down a Baja highway
The sea to one side
The mountains on the other
On the road to Todos Santos.
The Pacific that day
Stained deep gray
Was washday laundry water
And hung in endless expanse
Stretching under an equally
Gray and overcast sky,
And the mountains
Of the Sierra de la Laguna
Were alternately jade
Then lapis depending
On their distance,
The degree of vegetation
And density of the clouds
That sometimes shrouded
Their highest peaks.
I remember too
The giant cardón cactus
That seemed to stand
Like sentries on the slopes
And dominate the landscape
Reaching up like hands opening
With fingers stretching
To gasp the sky,
And I image them
To be the solitary souls
Of each Holy Saint
That line the road
To Todos Santos,
With arms outstretched
And lifted toward heaven,
In endless benediction,
Celebrating then, now and forever,
One perfect afternoon
By the sea.

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Patron Saint

I found a wooden Santo in an antique shop,
Without hands and it called to mind a passage
From the New Testament,
Where Jesus encourages that offending eyes
Be plucked out and tempting hands
Be severed by their owners.

This Santo with tempting hands removed
And paint peeling from his clothes was
Keeping the company of sinners
Who owned the shop and other lesser Santos
With both hands still attached, so I asked:
“¿cuánto cuesta este santo?”

The shop owner thought for a moment and
Slowly replied: “tres mil quinientos”.
I paused, then complained: “pero él no tiene las manos”
And I thought how much are a Saint’s hands worth
That have done such good work, and I said
To the shop keeper: “dos mil, no mas”.

So now “San Nolasmanos”
Keeps the company of a new, perhaps too I am sure,
Even greater sinner, but for me
It remains an object of deep devotion,
A Santo with tempting hands removed
Is one that I can pray to.

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Breakfast at Banamex

Wearing a tight black dress and
Very high heels with sharp pointy toes,
The woman standing in line says: "Huevos Rancheros."
The sounds the words make as she says them are sexy.

"The oven must be very hot,"
Says a woman in a white huipile
Standing behind her, "At least 500 degrees."

"Celsius?" A man in a navy blue business suite standing
in front of the woman wearing the tight black dress and
Very high heels with sharp pointy toes asks,
And a woman in a grey dress standing in front of him
hisses "Idiota" and slaps him on his belly.
There is laughter up and down the line.

"You must use tortillas de masa" a woman's voice says
From the front of the line.
She is out of sight near the bank teller's windows.

The line is long now and loops, twists and snakes
back upon itself and there is a man in a red guayabera
near the end of the line that is standing
Across from the woman wearing the tight black dress and
Very high heels with sharp pointy toes,
And he says, and it is not quite certain,
But he seems to be talking to someone
Who is not there or perhaps to himself:

"Breakfast is the saddest meal to eat alone.
It says so much about you, like your lover has left you.
You sleep alone at night. You have no one."

The woman wearing the tight black dress and
Very high heels with sharp pointy toes looks at the floor and
Pretends she does not hear the man wearing the red guayabera.
The line falls silent and no one speaks.
A teller through a window calls,
"Next! Siguiente por favor!"

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Rio Lagartos

In Rio Lagartos
fishing boats are anchored
against the backdrop of mangroves.
The sea is calm
as if each ripple and wave
is one short stroke of a palette knife.

Yet this is an imperfect paradise
where toxic words
coil and writhe on our tongues
like angry serpents.
Someone spits commands:
Don't and
Do.

Today I am the anvil,
tomorrow the hammer,
in this sea-saw struggle
in a sleepy beach town,
where the only constant sound
is the breeze in the palms
and the calls of the sea birds.

In this set from South Pacific
we are mummers in a sad drama,
the players in this tragedy,
today I am innocent victim
white as an ibis
tomorrow the villain,
my soul black
like a cormorant.

All my feelings are
are a flock of flamingoes
that gather in the salt flats
and call in cackles and caws
but never seem to rise in flight
to a worthy height.

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Escape

There is a special magic on January nights in Mexico:
In a quiet courtyard a poet is reading his words,
A numbered list that is part of a much longer poem
On the demise of the carrier pigeon, but not really
about carrier pigeons.

Number twenty five...
Number twenty six...
Number twenty seven...

There is a strong breeze, and
I can hear the wind in the bamboo
Making music,
Soft percussion sounds.

Number twenty eight...
Number twenty nine...
Number thirty...

The poet is shadow
Backlit from the light he is reading by,
He is tall and slender,
And when the Mexican night works its magic
He is Kurt Vonnegut.

Number thirty one...
Number thirty two...
Number thirty three...

Who's arranged a sabbatical from death,
A hiatus from hell, to live quietly in Mexico
Spending nights reading poetry
And recreating the calls of carrier pigeons
In quiet courtyards.

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The Plaza Principal

At night
in the Plaza Principal,
peddlers put out their wares
on blankets
spread across pavement,
earrings and necklaces,
bracelets and rings,
all manner of assorted
decorations and adornment
that celebrate the self.

Long strings of gemstones,
braided, twisted and groomed,
gleaming
like strands of hair
falling across a bare shoulder
and catching the light
just so.

Polished shells,
white
like snow
on a January morning,
with soft tints of pink
like the very pale skin
that lies under
a woman's breast.

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Venus on North Avenue

I saw Venus standing in the intersection
Of North Avenue and Wells Street
In pre-dawn darkness on a winter morning

In the middle of a pedestrian crossing
She stood one arm raised above her head
An index finger half extended hailing a cab

I saw her form a classical pose in a street empty
Of pedestrians and traffic rising from a sea of
Asphalt glistening with morning rain

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Why Don't I Eat Where I Dreamt Last Night?

Watching David "Fathead" Newman
at the Firefly Club, so close to the stage
my martini on the table
is a sonograph
that responds with a tremble
at every note.

Jazz
always unpredictable
anybody's guess where the rift will go
Quite impossible to say
up
the scale or
down,
A hint of cacophony,
an improvisational meandering,
a random walk, an impaired perambulation
that becomes a drunk
weaving and staggering down the street
after all the bars have closed.

The drummer
striking his sticks together,
a small and quick percussion:
tickticktick or perhaps
tock
ticktick.
The whisk on the drum
is a soft wind in the trees.

A tropical garden
seeps into my dreams,
banana leaves
brushing together in the breeze
are newspaper pages
slowly turning
and adjusting.

A woodpecker in the avocado tree:
tock
tocktocktock,
a mechanical,
almost hydraulic hammer

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that blends with
a mocking bird singing in a palm,
a dog barking, a cock crowing.

Your sleeping respiration,
long breath
in and another
out,
short breath,
sigh,
muttered mumble,
muffled moan,
now in my garden,
now in my dream.

If I scat na na
do do
bebe wha,
lolo sa sa
yaya pha,
to a woodpeckers percussion
would you know it
as my love song?

Would you be lulled into forgetting all
Transgression, oppression, possession,
Aggression?
There is a mockingbird
singing in the palm
making a saxophone sound.

Would it be more poignant
than my
tah-tah, tah-tah, tah-tah, tah-tah,
followed by
a long silence?

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Old Women

Old women in white huipiles walk down Calle 68,
on the east side en la mañana
on the west side en la tarde and at mediodía
it makes no difference for there is no shade
from the houses that line the street.

They pass looking neither right nor left,
but rather straight ahead like apparitions,
messengers on a mission from the distant past,
anachronistically carrying a bolsa de plástico in each mano,
dos-litros bottles of Coca-Cola or pan francés.

They return to homes showered in shadows
and move ghost-like in their white dresses
Through twilight kitchens that smell of tortilla
and pollo as they prepare meals
For hungry grandchildren.

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Lake Thompson

Lake Thompson
is rippled in wind,
the water a wrinkled sheet
on a bed that has been slept in
but remains unmade,
and on the far side
the selvage of sky
is tucked tight
behind a long line
of low roofs
just below
a backdrop of
swaying treetops.

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A Poet

In so much as I have seen
The downtown skyline cast
Its shadows on the surface
Of the lake at sundown and

In so much as I have met
My muse asleep in the back
Seat of a yellow cab on a
Crowded street and

In so much as I have scribed
The way her head leans back
With eyes closed and her mouth
Hung open slightly as she dreams

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Arrangement in Gray

Mist on Manhattan this morning
Was framed in my window like a
Poorly exposed black and white print

With graininess graduating to fog
Subduing the sharp geometry
Of the skyline with softened definitions

Blurred lines and intimation
Of forms a black and white tug
Pushes a barge up the Hudson

As sky and buildings and water
All blend into an abstract landscape
Colorless like Nebraska in January

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Study in Light and Shadow

At quiet moments in the garden I remember a life
Lived long ago, when flowers grew grey, where umber buds
Unfolded into sepia leaves against a charcoal sky, and a
Brown grass lawn stretched out before a beige brick house,
Its windows blackened by shadows, and where her breath
Against my face felt like the air of a January morning.

Today the morning light and shadows in the garden
Accentuate the heliconia leaves stretching skyward
Swaying slowly side to side like slender dancers
With soft gentle movements quivering in the air as
The bougainvillea growing up the courtyard wall
Lifts clusters of red blossoms in sunlit benediction.

All my memories are the offspring of shadows,
Dark angels, with *barro negro* faces and onyx eyes, that
Flutter like bats with obsidian wings, across an oily sky
On a night that lays over the landscape like a
Funerary shroud, and where each word she spoke
Was the sound of an ice cube falling into a glass.

I watch the palm branches move as if animated
By their own volition, articulating a cloudless
Yucatecan sky, bright green streamers set against
A background of pale *luz azul* with small
Quick swipes from a painter's knife in this
Hyperborean realm of honey morning sunlight.

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Imagist Cocktail

Blue swizzle stick and
a green wedge of lime
in an otherwise grey glass
that holds a slush
of ice and liquid
like the freezing slurry
that collects
in potholes by the curb
under the dirty yellow light
of street lamps in Detroit
on a dark January morning.

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Love from Mexico

Yesterday I bought a postcard for
For five pesos from a tourist shop
In the Plaza Principal.
It had a glossy image of Chichén Itzá
On the front, and was
Just large enough
To fit all the trite phrases
and banal expressions
I have to say.

Dear Merida is so
I wish you were here
Thinking of you fantastic
Please tell weather is the food
How unbelievable I bought
I went I saw I hope to see
Marvelous stay well
Todo mi amor
Desde México.

I cannot bring myself
To say that the other day
En el mercado de San Sebastian
Where the light is dim
Like a gothic cathedral
I was squinting trying to
Pick good bunches of cilantro
And quite unexpectedly
You came to mind.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Sunset in Barcelona

I.

It is sunset in Barcelona
and I am walking with her,
watching how the light shifts

toward the red side of the spectrum,
painting the pale underside
of the sycamore leaves

in a watercolor wash of soft pink.
I wonder...the sound of her voice
interrupts my thought...

Touching her as I speak,
unconsciously running
my finger down her upper arm,

lightly, barely touching,
my nail leaving a thin line
like a scalpel blade

the twilight color of the air,
is the saline and blood
of a fresh surgical incision.

I wonder how faithfully
I will remember this moment
at some far future point

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

II.

when light sinks a bit further
down the spectrum from reds
to blues to violet hues

with this introspection,
this post-mortem of a moment
that is a corpse laid out

on an autopsy table,
where all personal identification
is a single poem

written on a tag and tied
to a toe that tells the tale
of what is important

when our voices fall silent
and the leaves no longer twist
on their stems in the breeze

but remain still and unmoving
and the vertical and horizontal coordinates
that separate us in space

shrink to the narrowness of a
gothic street, sunken in the shadows
of sunset in Barcelona.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Sleeping Dog in an Old Train Station

Dreaming of sun.
Heat.
Half asleep.

The smell of the freight cars,
old oil and residual grease.
The man will come back to this place.
The sound of his footsteps
and his voice as he calls
will echo off the train cars,
walls and broken ceiling, and
the smell of *tortilla* and chicken
will be on him.

Rain.
Overcast.
Half awake.

Rain is falling
through the surgical incision
in the station's roof
and drips on my back.

The train station is still
and I am listening.
I think I hear the man's footsteps,
the sound of his sandals
clapping the concrete floor
as he walks.

No, it is only a bird's wings
Flapping, entering the train station
Through an opening in the roof.

Quiet.
Again.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Moment in the Garden

In the garden
There is
Moonlight in the palms,
And music
Playing,

The strum of one
Guitar string
Held for a
Moment
On the air,

Your finger
Against my skin--
A small
Beaded blue lizard
Resting on a leaf.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Picking Peaches

It was September
and in the Farmer's Market
where all the produce
has a bigness and lushness

unique to early autumn,
we were buying peaches,
un-uniform orbs
of spray painted gold

with brushstrokes of mauve
and crimson.
She laid her hands on them
for a quick moment

like a faith healer
imparting the restoring
grace of the Holy Ghost,
standing before the multitude,

the sick, maimed, infirm
and misshapen, her hands moving
with the unquestioning confidence
of those doing God's work.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

La Ermita de Santa Isabel

At the end of Calle 66 where the street
turns from pavement to red bricks
that rise and fall slightly in shallow swells
like the sea and lead to the little church
with a simple Spanish facade raised up high
on a pediment surrounded by tall palms,

I sit crowded in a narrow wooden pew
for Sunday Mass on May mornings
when it is hot and my shirt sticks to me
as I sweat all the sinfulness out my pores
and my vices drip slowly from my brow
to land on hands folded in prayer,

As I pray for the coolness of God's
mercy and I ask that He judge me in
Spanish, although all my sinning has been
done In English, for I know that
His Spanish judgment will be more
merciful and the most forgiving.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Study in Black and White

The Plaza de Torros
Is painted in light and shadow.
The sol seats ablaze
In a hyper-illuminated haze
That paints over color
With the washed out white
Of overexposure.

The air over the
Sombra seats is grainy,
Sprinkled with a graphite
And charcoal dust
That floats lazily and lingers
And never quite settles
On a long Mexican afternoon

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Our Garden

In the lushness of our courtyard, the quiet
Is broken only by the exotic songs of distant birds.
The sun shines brightly on terra cotta roof tiles,
And light and shadow are painted across our garden walls,
And change shape in kaleidoscope fashion.
In slow, almost imperceptible movements,
It passes across blossoms, plants and foliage
And marks the passage of time.

In this garden landscape
Little lemons trees grow in large earthen pots.
There is an old avocado tree as large and stately as an oak,
And palms branches sway and whisper soft rasping sounds
In the faintest tropical breezes.
Cactus and heliconia, bougainvillea and ginger
All grow together in this peaceable kingdom.

There is too a sadness here,
The sound of angry voices and quick footsteps,
A thing out sequence, the natural order broken,
A discordant grey disagreement,
The malignant black resentment,
That will in time blind us
To the greenness of all that grows here.

It will leave us only the drab grayscale vision of
Pale grey lizards and onyx scorpions that
Move from shadow to shadow,
From darkness to darkness,
As the sound of our voices grow ever more distant
To our ears and teeters on the threshold of silence.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

The Bells

The big bells of San Sebastian ring,
The first round are long gongs
That resonate in the morning air
And only with great reluctance
Do they slowly fall into full silence.

The small bells of San Sebastian ring,
The second round are short peals
Of high pitch, that cut the morning quiet
With excited and anxious rings
And quickly fade and evaporate.

The bells of San Sebastian ring,
Reminding me of the Mass I am missing,
The prayers not said, promises unkept,
And all the transgressions and sins
For which I have not sought
Full forgiveness.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Avocado Tree

The avocado tree in the garden
is old and it looks gnarled like an oak
due largely to the great number
of amputated limbs and cut branches.
Upon close inspection, however,
it looks nothing like an oak.

The avocado tree is empty in its center.
Its trunk is hollow and stretches a long way
straight through from top to bottom,
like the Holland Tunnel, and
there is one spot where
sunlight shines right through the tree.

A woodpecker in the avocado tree
awakens me each morning
the quick strikes in rapid succession
as if the bird's head and neck
were driven by great pneumatic pressure
and its little woodpecker heart, a powerful compressor.

In the Koran it is said that
the hammering of a woodpecker is the sound
of a soul knocking at the great portal of paradise.
I awake each morning to the sound
of souls transitioning, high in the upper limbs,
of my old avocado tree.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Loros

The heliconia in the garden have bloomed
An explosion in deep red,
The color of blood and vital organs:
Heart, kidney, liver.

Like a bright feathered bird
Perched on a stalk or stem
In high contrast with green foliage,
The color of the sea near Tulum,

And I often think that it is the deep scarlet
Of an embroidered shape: key, cross, fish
On a sacred vestment that a priest would wear
For a Christmas Midnight Mass.

In the quiet of late afternoons in January,
When it is hot and the sky is clear
And the sun shines brightly,
The air, still and unmoving,

I hear movement in the garden,
Wings flapping against elephant ear leaves,
The flashing colors of the loros
And blooms take flight.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Perfect Morning

It seemed like a perfect morning on the balcony of an apartment
In Achrafieh, against the crazy and irregular skyline
That is Beirut, where cable wires and television antennas
Slash and stab the placid clouds
That drift peacefully across the summer sky,
Chaos and disorder rule, and stand as proof
That the old Phoenician gods have dementia
And have sunk so far down into their geriatric funk
That they no longer care about anything.

In that perfect morning she stood there with me on the balcony
In East Beirut, the two of us leaning on the railing
And looking out over a drunken geometry
And a cacophony of shape in a cockeyed landscape.
She standing in stark contrast
With both earrings and necklace
Color coordinated with blouse and skirt,
A picture of fashion and personal perfection,
The queen of everything in its place.

What I remember most of that morning,
Was how I blended so totally with the skyline,
How it embraced all my flaws and imperfections
Both great and small, my mismatched clothes
My unkempt hair, my slovenly habits and careless ways.
I became a part the cityscape that day,
High above the streets, in the choking fumes
From traffic below that formed a nimbus around me,
That celebrated and sanctified
My own inner disorder.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Tropical Twilight

In April we watch the palms backlit against the purple sky
Of a tropical twilight, when the nights grow hot, the air
Heavy and so thick that seconds slow and some are
Entirely skipped like an elusive arrhythmia of the heart.

In our coming together, parting is implied, as when one says:
“Creature that lives” at the same time says: “Creature that will die”
Although unstated, it is understood fully, especially on hot nights
When time comes to a full stop and begins a backward flow,

Slowly at first in the initial momentum that overcomes the inertia
Of an object at rest, then moving more rapidly it picks up speed
To the point where my hands are leaving her breast, our embrace
Breaking, lips parting and the space between our bodies growing,

As we find ourselves speeding apart, two galaxies in and ever
Expanding universe, our footsteps fall more faintly as we move
Farther away and the sound of our voices diminish to a distant
Whisper, like a breeze in the palms, before attenuating into silence.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Orpheus in O'Hare

Under jaundiced light from recessed lamps
Conversations run incessantly
Like water in a fountain and
Blend with the unceasing whirs
Of jet engines and overhead pages
Too weak to hear like neighbor's
Voices distorted and muffled by
Apartment walls

I am Orpheus descended in the underworld
Moving through the dull glow of
Hades Filled with spirits trapped and trudging
Aimless in corridors with terrazzo floors
As I search for Eurydice in airport
Lounges or standing at a payphone
Slipping one black pump on and off
Her foot

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Gringo Ghosts

My house on Calle 68 in Centro Historico
is haunted by gringo ghosts, two

bilingual spirits that speak only spanglish;
I see them in the twilight transition from night

today when the first gun-barrel, gray-blue
light of morning fills the garden, their

breath visible in the movement of leaves
as they exchange words in urgent whispers

hovering in the high branches of the aguacate
tree wearing traditional phantasmal shrouds

that flutter, flap and flow like fluid in the breeze
as they move amid shadows of the foliage

until the sun rises above the low rooftops,
transforming shadows in my courtyard

into streams of honey light, and the gun-barrel,
gray-blue sky turns Yucatecan azul.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

New York School

on the phone
your words and intent
remain a puzzle
jazzed up
esoteric beat poet
of the New York School
communicating
thoughts and feelings
in one long
confused jumble
of fabricated
abstractions

so this is for you
a thin slice
of a Mexican afternoon
where blue music plays
beyond my courtyard
walls of verde y amarillo
the palms
unfurled above
my memory
of a girl riding
a pink bicycle
one day in
August

the multicolored
streamers and her hair
both lifted by the
air and trailing
a bit farther
behind and

I am left
wondering
under the palms
unfurled
if your heart
will ever catch
your mouth

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Merida

The chain saw buzz of cars
and the rising roar of buses
in narrow streets
a woman's slender arm
the right angle where elbow bends
the dead-end road
of arm and shoulder.

This is a city a poet can love,
and in the night
the falling raindrops
slow and patterned drips
a living meter of
horse's hooves
on the pavement.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Jade Vagina

I watched the sunrise today
Reflected in the many panes of glass skyscrapers
That rise majestic and monolithic like tree covered mountains
And mark the far side of the harbor and form
The crowded skyline that is Hong Kong
And in the mirrored mosaic of articulated glass
White clouds slowly drift across blue sky
And dirty white high-rises stand shoulder to shoulder
Back to back and side-to-side their images mingled
Distorted and smudged like an impressionist landscape
In the background the green waters of the harbor open
Like a jade vagina before the phallic shapes of glass
Stone and steel that rise wide and erect to penetrate
The morning and hide the green hills and the squalor
Of the run down apartment buildings in mirrored gray

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Rising

The nimbus of sunrise
Reflected in architectural glass

Articulated in panes
Growing large and more golden

Across the street
The financial center holds in each

Window a piece of sky
Like a mosaic in a Byzantine tomb

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Detroit River

When I was a boy
I spent summer afternoons
in a small fishing boat
on the river.

We'd fish deep
out by buoy #3,
a channel marker
with a large bell at its peak
that peeled with each rolling wave.

We'd fish the rocky shallows
by the leaning lighthouse
that listed steeply toward
the westward shore.

All of our large imperfections
gathered within the too small confines
of our little boat, weighing it down
precariously low
in the water.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

In a Spanish Garden

In a Spanish garden tall palms grow
Bordering arched walkways where
Hibiscus and Birds of Paradise bloom
In large terra cotta pots.
On sunlit mornings
I am drawn by the sound of fountains.
Their silver streams like
Pillars supporting a perfect sky
As bronze turtles swim in spray
Near terrace walls in mosaics
Of brightly colored tile
That recall Van Gogh's
Trees In The Asylum Garden.

Madness is a kind of remembering
As roof tiles in clear sunlight
Take me back to a churchyard
At noontime recess,
Were children's voices
Echo up the clerestory
To a sea of terra cotta roof tiles
Creating a pattern of light
And shadow to study
Through classroom windows
As nuns lecture on topics far away
From palms, exotic and surreal,
In a Spanish garden.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Tendejon las Américas

On afternoons when it is very hot
and business is slow at the corner
Tendejon las Américas, the shopkeeper
sleeps on a low wooden chair behind
the counter. The top of his head barely
visible below a shelf lined with dusty cans
of beans, and it looks as if the store
is unattended and deserted.

It is quiet except for an occasional autobús
with brakes grinding to a halt at the stop sign.
The owner speaks a little English
and on some of these hot afternoons
I spend hours with him drinking cervezas
from white Styrofoam cups and talking
of many things: his life in the Estados Unidos
as a “mojado”, and his apartment
on the corner of Sunset & Douglas.

After finishing our first beer we always say:
“Nunca uno!” laughing as we pour another.
On some afternoons he has no visitors and
sleeps undisturbed behind the counter,
his head bobbing below the shelf lined
with the dusty cans of beans.

He is dreaming the happy sounds of new
quinientos pesos notes crackling in his hand,
coins striking, rolling and spinning across the counter,
the music that is played at the bullfight
and the crowd shouting: Toro! Toro! Toro!

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

La Casa de la Cigüeña Segundo

Living in Merida with her has transformed me into a laughing, drinking, dancing and carousing calavera that they sell to tourists in the plaza. The sound of her working in the kitchen echoes through the house and into the courtyard, her voice calling me from the garden, my hand against her skin, are all small reminders that only endings give full meaning.

A poem is a slice of time, like a wide wedge of pecan pie, an artificial construct, a contrived temporal delineation like when dinosaurs roamed the earth or when Jesus walked around Judea, that spotlights a subject in time for focused and detailed treatment in an intensely emotional way with a definite beginning and a distinct end.

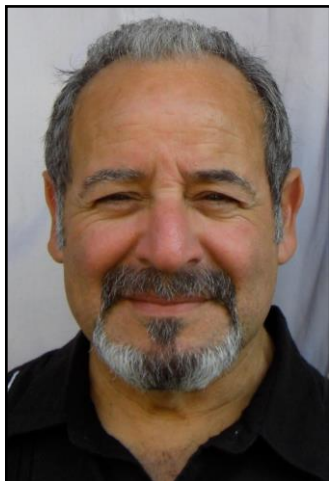
So this poem is to celebrate her working in our Mexican kitchen, the clang of a pan on a tile counter, our piece of pastel de nueces, set upon a plate with two forks, our time en la casa de la cigüeña segundo and how we will be judged by how fully aware we are of the edges of us, where the goo of pecan filling begins and where the flakey crust ends.

One of us is Jesus walking on the sea of Galilee and the other, a Jewish mother who stands on the shore calling: "Roll up your pant legs, don't get your clothes wet!" The secret of walking on water and doing other equally impossible tasks is not caring. It is a wholly right brain exercise, a giving of one's self over completely to a wholehearted and perfect love.

I hear her voice drifting from the garden, the sound of her left brain talking to my right brain, as I try to unravel dark important mysteries like why all the dinosaurs died: how an asteroid the size of Manhattan could strike the Yucatan and kick off a crazy causal chain that could bring us to the point of impact, to do the impossible, and smile at each other over a piece of pecan pie.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

About Doug Tanoury



Doug Tanoury began writing poetry in elementary school and continued writing poetry all of his adult life. He has read his poetry in venues in Los Angeles, CA, Greenwich Village, NYC, London, UK and numerous locations in Merida, Mexico, and Detroit, MI including universities, television and radio program readings.

Doug began writing and publishing poetry on the Internet in 1996. He founded Athens Avenue, an international group of Internet poets that wrote together and supported each other in writer's colony fashion. Doug's poetry has been featured in the New York Times Online, Yahoo Internet Life, The Detroit News and the Detroit Metro Times. His publication credits include electronic as well as traditional ink and paper publications.

Doug has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for Poetry. He is the founder of Funky Dog Publishing and his publication credits include Writer's Digest, Poetry Magazine, A Small Garlic Press, A Little Poetry, Southern Cross Review, Purr Magazine, The Denver Quarterly, The Pittsburgh Quarterly, The Orange Room Review, Zuzu's Petals, The Adirondack Review, Pif Magazine, Plum Ruby Review as well as many others. Doug has published 20 volumes of poetry.

Merida Poems and Other Poetry of Place by Doug Tanoury

Other books of poetry by Doug Tanoury:

- ❖ Art History
- ❖ Avon Poems
- ❖ Chicago Poems
- ❖ City Sonnets
- ❖ Cloud Boulevard
- ❖ Crows on My Path
- ❖ Detroit Poems
- ❖ Exodus Poems
- ❖ Getting Religion
- ❖ Hollywood Park Poems
- ❖ Imperfect Venus
- ❖ Of Evenings in Eden
- ❖ Produce Poems
- ❖ St. Mary's Art Cloister
- ❖ The Physics of Tea
- ❖ Theogony
- ❖ Tolstoy's Ghost
- ❖ Wounded Muse
- ❖ Zen Bandits